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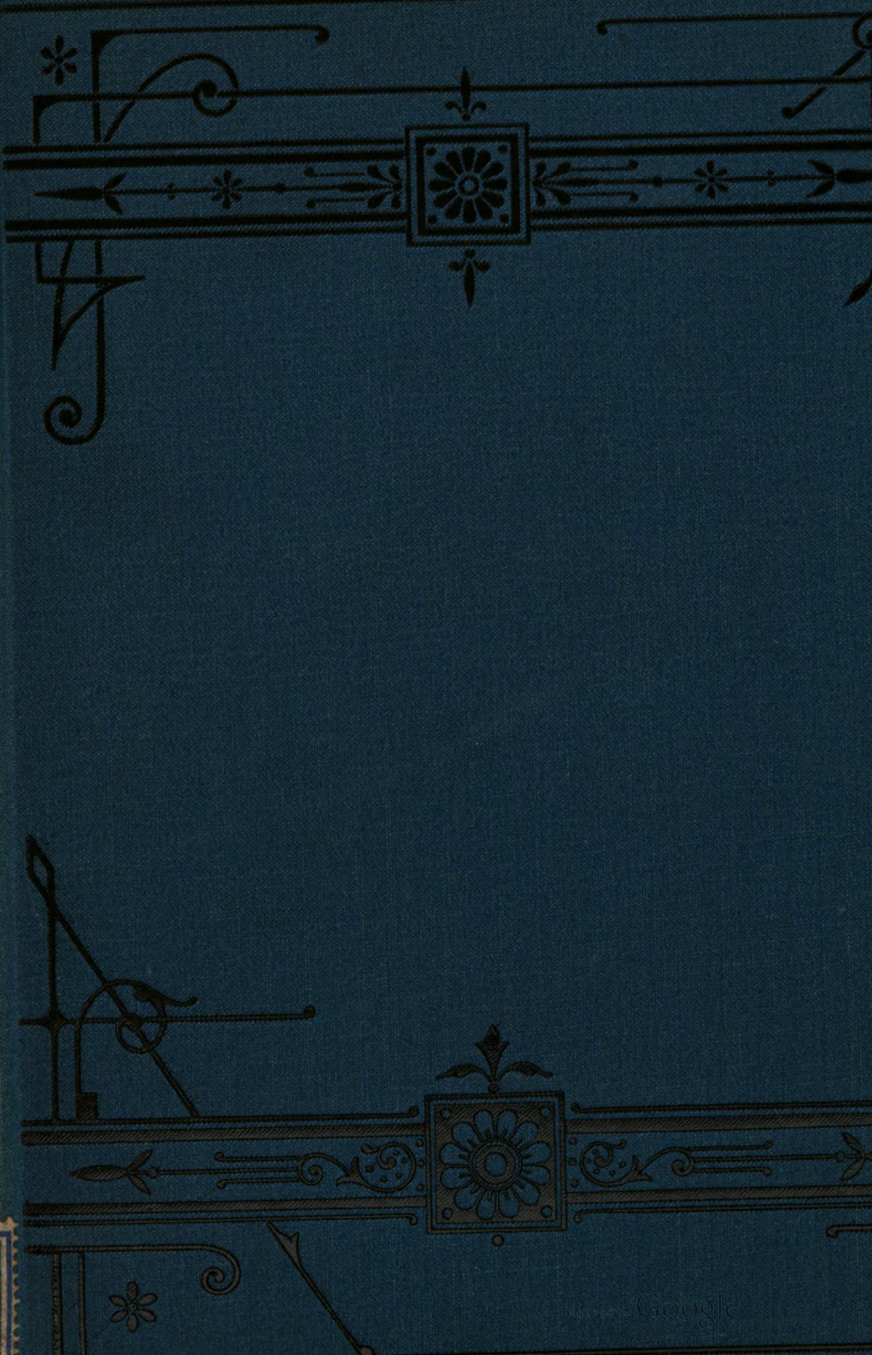
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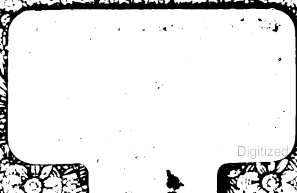
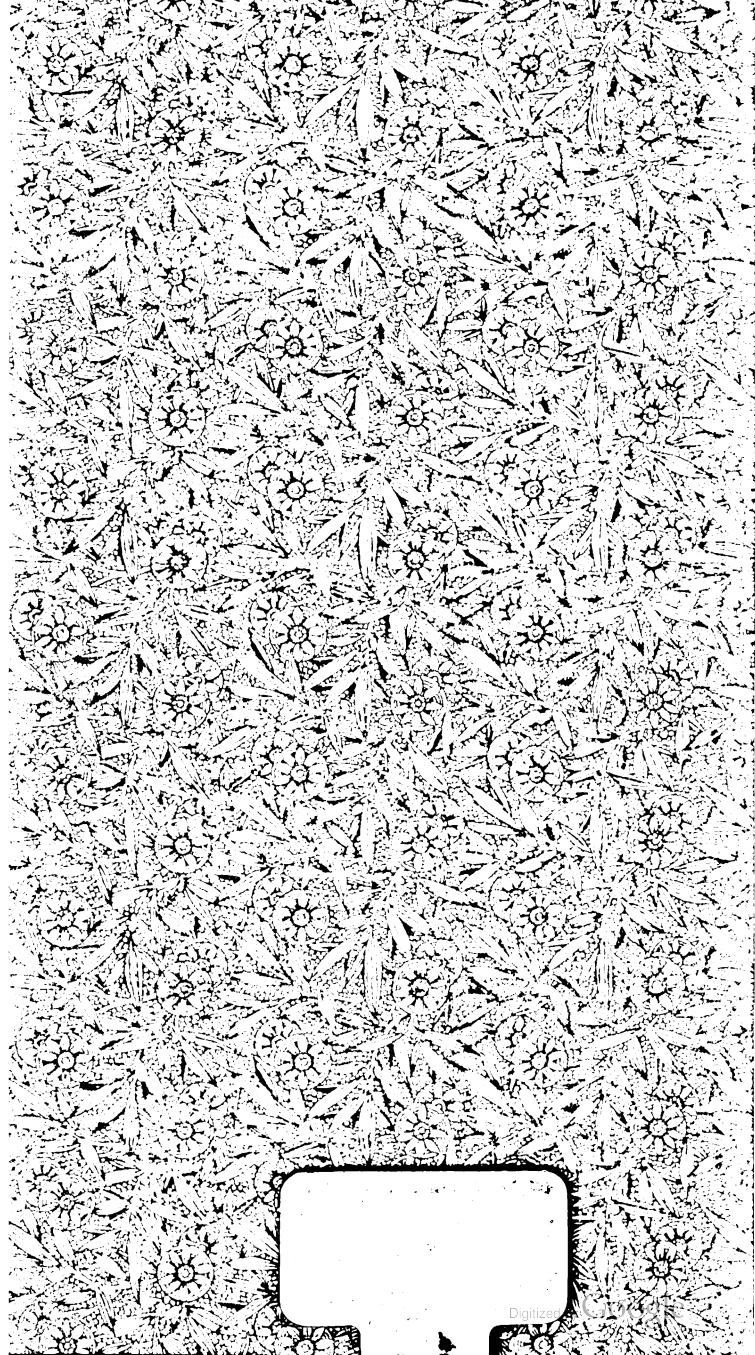
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THE STORY OF A STRANGE MARRIAGE

IN TWO VOLUMES

BY
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CHAPTER I.

“THE inn was quite quiet when I got there, except for a few men working about the horses in the stables. The landlady met me, and led the way up a winding stair, and then along a passage to a door which she unlocked, and then she signed for me to go in. I had met the German lady on the stairs, who, as rapidly as she could, gave me the proper instructions, which were also written down upon

a paper for my guidance. The landlady left me at the door, having, I suspect, a dislike to looking upon death, which I have observed in some people. I think the governess lady shared this feeling, but am not sure, so I was allowed to enter the room alone. The western sun was still beating upon the windows, and the blinds were pulled down, so that it was a subdued light that I entered upon. Outside, the birds were singing their glad hymn of praise before going to their nightly rest. Someone had arranged a few flowers about the room, that sent a pleasant smell of summer-time all about me. Strange to say, I think there is no sense that has the power of awakening memory like the sense of smell. Gorgeous sunsets I have seen since then; the song of the birds is ever a delight to me;

but gorgeous sunsets, nor the song of birds, nor the mountains, nor the roaring torrents that I looked out upon, can bring back that memorable evening as does the smell of those few flowers. I think, at the end of an eternity, a breath of air wafting their sweet perfume to me would recall each little scene as if it had all happened yesterday. I raised the window-curtain to let in more light. I then went to the bed. A thin white handkerchief was laid over the dead face, and a sheet was arranged so as to cover the figure. I carefully removed these coverings, but, ah! what a sight burst upon my wondering eyes! This, then, was the beauty I had read of, and had never believed in. This was the human face divine that was said to rival all other shows of nature. Could anything be more perfect?

“ Oh ! dear dead girl ; my heart stood still with joy to see this new undreamed-of loveliness, with sorrow that it so soon, and for ever, must be hid from our sight. One thought seemed to speak comfort to me. I should see her again before they laid her in the grave, before the cruel hand of death had marred one feature. She lay as if in sleep. The chestnut hair, like a cloud of light, was allowed to cluster round the proud young head and marble forehead. What wondrous eyes must those have been that slept beneath the shadow of the dark silken eyelashes. To think that I should never look upon them ! But I had to hasten with my work. I quickly finished all I had to do, and again I arranged the coverings as they were before. Rapidly did I work at my task, and it was finished sooner

than I had promised. Ever, I fear, I must confess, the love of beauty in any form, in nature, in art, wherever it is to be found, is a weakness in me. Still I hope it would never ensnare my judgment. But it is a great joy to me, and one thought filled my mind as I worked, 'I shall see her again.' A new sense seemed to have been given to me. I never thought such perfection was possible.

"The German young lady had arranged with me that there was to be a rough inner shell which I made to screw down, and an outer coffin more highly finished. This I made to fasten simply with a lock and key. Never was the ghastly nature of my work more terribly impressed upon me. I was glad when I had finished it; and, putting it

upon a little mule-cart, I took my way up the mountain side to the hotel. As I went I gathered some of the beautiful wild flowers that grew by the road side, and bound them in a knot. Then I carefully hid them away under my coat.

“ At length I arrived at the inn. Again I saw the German lady, who ordered the Milor’s man to help me to carry my work in. She gave me some more instructions, but left me at the door. Strange that she looked a resolute, determined woman, and yet, I think, had a superstitious dread of looking upon a dead person. The old servant, with tears streaming down his cheek, helped me to raise the maiden, and we laid her gently and reverently in her little home. For a moment the dear head rested on my arm,

then it was lying like a tired child's upon the pillow. The old man, if he noticed me through his tears, must have thought I wept for company, that it was a habit of foreigners; but my heart was full of sorrow to think that all this loveliness, this sweetness, must, like a rose, fall to decay.

“At length I was told to withdraw while the friends took their last look. I went into a small room opposite to wait. I heard the sound of doors opening and then shutting, of several footsteps on the stairs, then there was the sound of bitter weeping, then all was still. Someone in the passage told me in my own language to go and finish my work. I could see in the dim light, as I passed into the chamber of death, the figure of a woman rapidly disappearing through a

door at the other end of the passage. Now was I alone with the dead. Someone had thrown over her bunches of rare and beautiful flowers. One lovely rose lay in her right hand, on a finger of which a ring of wonderful splendour shone. Carefully I pulled out my own offering of mountain flowers and laid it on her breast. One lock of hair had strayed from under her cheek, and lay upon her neck. Oh, that I could possess myself of it as something that had belonged to her. I hastily looked about for some means of taking it off, but none of my tools were for such delicate work. It was of no use, so I must look my last and put her away from the eyes of men for ever. I laid hold of the inner lid and was about to screw it down when a thought came into my head which

made me start and colour like a guilty thing. I listened—all was quiet. I knelt down upon one knee, and, bending over the fair young face, I kissed it. Instantly I started up, filled with shame at my own presumption. It seemed to me that even in death she resented the contamination, and as if a frown crossed over the brow. Steps, too, were on the stairs. Hastily I seized the lid, and in a minute or two it was screwed tightly down. I locked the outer part, and all was over, and I left the inn with a heavy heart.

“ Before quitting, however, I had an interview with my countrywoman. She seemed better and less constrained, more gentle and womanly. She paid me part of my bill, and would pay the whole the next day. She

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also spoke to me of my prospects in life, and asked how I came into that valley, and what part of our common country had given me birth. There was much about her that would please.

CHAPTER II.

“THAT night the coffin was removed to the little chapel by the lake to wait till the next day, when they would take her to the, to me, unknown land across the sea. One set of the chapel keys was left in my keeping, and I was at the chapel in the evening to open the door for the little party that brought her from the inn, and I closed the door after they left. I was to be there early in the morning to help in the removal from the

chapel when the friends began the homeward journey.

“That night I lay and tossed about upon my bed. My dreams, when I did sleep, were haunted by the dead girl’s face. Sometimes, too, I thought she was crying to me for help from some great peril. Sometimes I saw her all crowned with lilies and roses, and sparkling jewels, but her eyes would not open. She came nearer and nearer towards me ; and when the face almost touched mine, and I could feel the icy breath on my cheek, suddenly she opened her eyes upon me, and they were awful, glittering, terrible eyes—cruel as death—not human, but devilish. I started up and was wide awake. The moon was shining on the lake, and the country seemed as light

as day but for the great shadows that were cast by the mighty rocks.

“Suddenly an over-mastering desire took possession of me. I must have that lock of hair. I must see that matchless face again. I must restore the memory of it to my brain, so that that hideous dream might not come between me and my newly-born sense of beauty. I tried to conquer the desire, for I felt it was like the desires of those whose reason was forsaking them, but even as I tried to push it back I found that I was fumbling with my tools. It seemed to my heated imagination as if the very tools that I wanted came uppermost, without my will, to my hand. The thought struck me, horrible enough to one who has always been well thought of for

his honest dealings, that if I were caught, they would take me for the worst of thieves, a violater of the dead for the mere sake of that costly ring. In my madness I cared not. No one, I felt sure, would interrupt my solitary visit. I would risk it. I must risk it. Finally, I opened the window and went out into the moonlight, armed with everything I could possibly want, including a little lamp that would only spread its feeble rays sufficiently around to let me see where I worked, but far too dim and shaded to attract any watching, sleepless eyes from the opposite side of the lake up at the inn. I had no cause to fear any others; all habitations were miles away from the lonely chapel, excepting my own, where only my old blind friend lay quietly asleep. I walked quickly

along the shores of the lake till I reached the chapel door. I took the key and was just fitting it into the lock, when my heart seemed to stand still with horror.

“Oh, God! what an awful cry was that! Was some poor creature drowning in the lake? No, I could see every nook and cranny on it, and all was still. Again the cry was repeated, and this time it distinctly came from the chapel, and took more decided tones. It was a cry for help, but in a foreign tongue. In an instant I had the door unlocked.

“‘Yes, yes,’ I cried in my own language, ‘I will help you. I am near; do not be afraid.’

“In the twinkling of an eye I had the outer case unlocked, and still speaking words

of comfort and encouragement, I rapidly unscrewed the inner one, and, oh joy! I, at length, was holding the trembling girl in my arms. With fierce but feeble hands she clung to me as a frightened child clings to its protector, and I knew enough English to make out from her rapid, low, gurgling utterances what she said.

“‘My poor child,’ I said, soothing her as best I could, ‘what is this that has happened to you? But never fear. You are safe now.’

“‘Oh, dear human voice; oh! warm, warm, human hand; oh blessed, human, living being! I hear you, I see you once again. Oh, what a dreadful moment it was!’

“She held me to her with an agony of terror and of joy. She kissed me on the

cheek in her utter abandonment of gratitude.

“ ‘ But who are you that has come like an angel of light to give me life once more ? ’

“ ‘ Oh, I am but a poor carpenter, but I am therefore better able to help you than others might be. ’

“ ‘ Yes, yes, my kind friend ! You will not leave me all alone ? Oh, where have I been ? ’

“ ‘ Have you been long crying for help ? ’
I said, trembling at the thought, and cursing my doubts and questionings that had delayed the following of my own inclination.

“ ‘ Oh, no, no ; but I do not know where I have been ; I have been travelling back from a world of dreams for a long time. Someone far, far away kissed me on my lips.

It seemed to wake me, but I have been long, long in waking. But oh! I did not know where I was. I thought—I dare not think what I thought—I cried out, and then a human voice, the dear, familiar, kind, human voice called to me, and I knew there was now help.’

“ ‘Poor child. Thank God I was at hand. But where shall I take you to—back to your father?’

“ ‘Yes, back there; back to Janet—back to kind Janet. How glad she will be to see me!’

“My heart was sad somehow at these words, but what could I expect? Suddenly a horror seemed to come into her face as her memory began to clear.

“ ‘No, not there. Back rather to that place from which you have taken me. Oh,

no! let me go anywhere, but not back to that man. May I not stay with you? Take me into the air; I am faint.'

"I took her into the moonlight and seated her on the stone porch. It was a warm, but fresh pleasant night, and she could take no harm. I wrapped her in my coat, and with her head leaning on my arm she drank in the air as if it had been wine.

" 'I must not go back there,' she said. 'You don't know what they are going to do to me. I cannot see your face. I don't know if you are young or old, but your voice is kind. Let me be your servant, sister, daughter, your slave. I will work for you when I am well like any servant, but not back to them.'

" 'So help me God, I shall never let you go

back to them, my dear little sister. Content you, child; you shall be as safe with me as if you were in your mother's keeping. My arm is strong and can work for both of us; as far as I can make you happy you shall be so.'

“‘Thanks, thanks, kind friend; but you said you were a poor man. I am too weak to work just yet, though I shall learn to work, but I shall only be a burden on you for long I fear. Oh, where shall I go?’

“‘You shall go with me, my lady. I am not so poor as that I have not enough and to spare for you and me. You shall be welcome in my poor house as the flowers in May. I wish I could offer you better lodging. But I must leave you for a few minutes.’

“‘Oh, no, no! Where are you going? You must not leave me.’

“ ‘ I am only going into the chapel to finish the work I have begun.’

“ ‘ No, I dare not go in there; I dare not let you leave me.’

“ ‘ But if I do not do what I want to they will come and see what has taken place, and take you from me!’

“ ‘ Well, then, I will come with you.’

“ We entered the chapel again, where she sorely impeded my work, but I was not in a humour to find fault. She held on to my arm the whole time that I worked. I filled a sack belonging to myself, which lay in a corner of the chapel, with leaves and earth, and I then held her up in one arm and the sack in the other, and saw that their weight seemed to correspond.

“ A shadowy smile crossed her face as the

meaning of my work dawned upon her, but but there was a terror in her face the whole time we stayed in the horrible charnel-house, and at length I induced her to go and sit outside by the lake till I had finished everything, and left the place and all in it apparently as it was before I came. I then joined her, and we began our homeward journey. But she was too weak to walk far, and at length I had to carry her. A strange pair we must have looked, if anyone had met us, —she still shrouded in the awful garments of the tomb, and looking more like a visitor from the spirit-land than she really was; I, the bearer of the ghost-like burden, looking and feeling as if life were coursing through every vein in my body with tenfold energy.

I had no more feeling of fatigue than if I had had an infant in my arms.

“ ‘How strong you are to carry me so. You have the strength of a giant.

“ ‘Ah, my lady, you are so light ; it is like carrying a moon-beam.’

“ ‘Take care ; you must not call me “my lady” now. I am your sister or your daughter. My eyes are dim and weak, for I have been ill. I cannot see you plainly ; are you young or old ?’

“ ‘I am a young man. You must call me your brother. You shall be my care as much as if we were children of one mother. But I am far beneath you, my lady, and I must not forget that, and shall not.’

“ ‘Not so ! I owe you my life and pro-

tection from — oh ! let us not think of it.’

“She hid her face against my shoulder with a convulsive movement, and her arms tightened round my neck, with the recollection of what had passed.

“‘No, no,’ I said ; ‘try to forget it. Think only of the new life before you, and of a new-found brother that will protect and guard you from danger.’

“‘Yes, yes, my brother ; let me forget the past, the bitter, bitter past ! And what house is this ?’

“‘This is my poor little home, scarcely fit for a great lady like you, but to such as it is you are heartily welcome.’

“‘Oh, do not call me a great lady. I am but a poor beggar girl humbly asking your

charity. Who else is in the house?' she suddenly asked, with alarm.

" 'No one you need be afraid of, no one who will ever see you if you do not wish it.' "

"I told her of my old landlady and her infirmity of hearing and seeing. I fear that for the first time since I had known her I felt rather thankful for my poor old friend's blindness and deafness, and for her unsociable ways. It seemed as if fate had prepared the way for such an addition to my house. Old Madame La Harpe, though the best of women, either from blindness or that she was by nature deficient in cleanliness, had never been clean enough to suit me; in fact, she had been rather an annoyance to me in this respect. The townspeople of my native place were noted for their cleanliness, and

my mother was noted amongst them. To me cleanliness and order is a natural accompaniment of all that is beautiful, nay, is a part, and an essential part, of beauty, though a certain lady has since assured me that beautiful Nature, the mistress whom I worship, next to herself and her children, is one of the dirtiest drabs she knows. 'Dirty, dusty, and untidy, I hate your grub. Only washing herself now and then with a little rain water when she can get it, and littering every place with her leaves and her untidy ways.' Finding that my good landlady fell far short of my desire for cleanliness, and being young and active, I kept my own part of the old cottage according to my fancy. I had had but one quarrel with her, and that was about her determination to come in and

do what she called clean, and sometimes in her blindness to destroy one or two of my small treasures. So I had taken to lock the door of my workshop and room when I went out. At length, after some time, she had grown to understand that she was to leave my side of the house quite alone. It was but a small, poor place that I was taking my new-found charge to, but there was nothing that could offend her, I felt sure. Some beauty there was about it, too. The view of the lake was as fair a scene as any princess could have. In my leisure hours I had carved and adorned some of my furniture, so that, though I had made it out of common materials, it was pleasing to the eye. I loved the flowers, too, that grew wild in that valley, and I never could resist the pleasure

of gathering them as I came home in the evening, and the same feeling made me careful for them when I brought them home. I felt I could soon make the place, though, not fit for her—where was the golden casket fit for such a jewel?—still a sweet and fresh abode. We had never any visitors, and I hoped that, till the people nearest us had forgotten Lady Margaret Laidlaw, I might keep her concealed from curious eyes, and till I could form some better plans for her accommodation. I had at the back of my workshop a little room where I kept my tools and various things. Here I could soon set myself up something to sleep upon. I knew that the room I had used before could soon be made habitable enough, and it would be my pride to make it a pleasant place for her. As I

said before, and she has often said since, she had no complaint to make about the want of cleanliness. I took her through the window, which was open, and laid her down. She seemed much exhausted, and at length it struck me that she must be faint for lack of food. I knew that the English, especially English women, love tea, but I had none by me; but, like all our people, I can make first-rate coffee, and without disturbing old madame, whom I blessed for her deafness, I soon got her some food such as her soul loved. At first she seemed to have a difficulty in swallowing, but by-and-by I had the inexpressible pleasure of seeing her take what I had brought her with some relish.

“‘ Ah,’ she said, ‘ how kind you are ; and now that I see your face, I see that it is not

your fault that you are kind. You cannot help it; can you, now?’

“ ‘I could not help being kind to you, my lady, if I tried with all my strength.’

“ ‘No, I know it; neither to me nor to any other beggar woman that asked alms of you, nor to any half-starved dog or cat, or wee, wee chirping mouse. Tell me, have you any mice here?’

“ ‘No, my lady, I think not.’

“ ‘Oh, what a nice place this is. We used to have rats where I come from, and I was so frightened sometimes I thought I heard them climbing on my bed.’

“I was glad to see her grow somewhat chatty, but her face suddenly changed as she said this, and she added —

“ ‘Ah, God! there were worse things than

rats. Now that I have escaped through this grave and gate of death, I may say it seems more terrible, I think, even to look back upon than it was at the time. You will not betray me, will you, or give me up to them again? I wish I could see Janet, though; she was always kind and good to me.'

"'You must not see her though, for it would be sure to betray you, my lady.'

"'How have you got hold of that "my lady?" Don't, please, call me that. It would attract the attention of any English person. What is your name?'

"'I am Fritz Hübner. I am a German.'

"'Well, then, I must learn to call you Fritz. My name is— Ah, what was my name? My memory is so strange, but it was Margaret, I think.'

“ ‘ Yes,’ I said, ‘ Margaret Laidlaw. Suppose I call you Gretchen, little Margaret ?’ ”

“ ‘ Ah, do ; I must now be your sister Gretchen, and I can talk your language when I have strength to think. You are right, I must not see Janet. I wonder if my father grieves for me ? But no, I must not go back. I feel that this is more like home, than home ever was like home.’ ”

“ ‘ Now I must leave ; you, you look wan and weary. You need not fear old Madame La Harpe finding you—she is both blind and deaf—but be careful, your people are still in the place. I shall tap three times on your window in the morning, but be careful how you show yourself. I am close at hand if you want me.’ ”

“ ‘ Thank you, my new-found brother. Is

it long to the morning light? Oh, Fritz—the darkness!’

“‘Do not think of it. Think how soon I came. It might have been so much worse.’

“‘Yes, yes, but that is the horror. The ‘might have been’ is so awful. There is no end to its horror. Oh, Fritz Hübner, you look so tired. So, dear brother, it will soon be light? May God reward you for all your kindness.’

“‘Yes, Gretchen, it will soon be light. Lay your head back and give me your hand, and I will watch by you till you fall asleep.’

“‘But you are so tired, and must work in the morning.’

“‘No, no, I am not tired. Shut your eyes, my child, and may God guard and bless you.’

“I sat for about half an hour, and watched the terrified girl sink into a troubled sleep. How wonderful and strange it was to see the lovely face lying there. If she was beautiful in death, much more beautiful was she in life. There was something inexpressibly touching to me in her perfect confidence. I knew in myself that it was not misplaced, though I knew at the same time that it was partly owing to the tremendous revulsion of feeling from a horror of great darkness to light and life, and I stood a living symbol to her of the wondrous change.

“Strange thoughts and anxious ones crossed my mind as I watched her gradually sinking into sleep. What was it that had happened to her? Could she have fallen into a trance? If such was the case, might it not happen

again? How was I to keep her here without its being known sooner or later? Might not all my tender care for her now make the anger of her natural guardian more fierce if he should find her out? The tender young blossom, that seemed as if a blast would shatter her to pieces! Then, even if it should never come to the knowledge of her own people, could I, ought I, to keep her with me? How could I guard her character from the evil tongues in the world? For my own character I should let it take its chance. I had a weakness for its standing well in the eyes of my fellows, but that must not weigh with me now, especially as I knew my actions were guided by no unworthy motive.

“Underneath all, another danger lay, perhaps to myself the greatest. As I said

before, beauty in nature delighted me, and always had done so. The one form of nature that had never moved me in the least was human nature, at least in its outer aspects. My mother and old Madame La Harpe were to me the most beautiful women I had ever seen. But most certainly it was not their beauty that first attracted me. Not one of the young maidens at the inn, or at any of the towns round about, had ever caused me an additional beat of the pulse, that I am aware of. A single smile on old Madame's wrinkled face was as pretty to me as they were, nor could I flatter myself that they looked on me with any more interest than I did on them. I think we all agreed in thinking one another ugly. And so we were. We were civil enough, and often friendly

enough. I have no complaint about any of them. But now it was different. I knew that I should love this girl; that she would take possession of me, body and soul, till my life would become a burden unbearable to me. 'For,' said I, as I studied the sleeping face, 'would she ever consent to become my —' The remainder of the sentence died away in a helpless shake of the head. Was it the least likely that happiness such as this should be reserved for me, a rough common workman? No, now that those dark, loving eyes were closed in sleep the maiden had a certain prideful majesty as if, in sleep, at any rate, she remembered the race from which she sprang. When she was awake the love-light in her eyes and her gentle, modest ways threw all that into shade. Yet, in

truth, it was too soon even for me to think of her as anything but what she chose to call herself—my little sister. I knew that trouble would come. It was a strange and unnatural conjunction, this of a young man and a young girl with no other visible protection but his. Fate had thrown us thus oddly together. I rested though, in this certainty: she was safe with me as a child with its mother. Trouble might come, but she was a bright sunbeam that had travelled across my path. Let me enjoy the warmth while it lasted. At length, as the birds awoke to life and the dawn was breaking over the eastern hills, I took myself off to my workshop, and got what rest I could on my deal board. Another day I must find something better to sleep

upon. I cannot say my rest was unpleasant ; youth is romantic, and the thought kept recurring and recurring in spite of good sense and reality. What would life be, passed with a wife like Gretchen ?

CHAPTER III.

"IN the morning I found her looking ill and anxious. She had not slept much more than I had, and was tormented by fears of being discovered and taken back. She seemed to have taken root in my little home in the most marvellous way. I saw that her terror of her father, of a Sir Laidlaw, to whom she would have been married, greatly helped this feeling. I did my best to reassure her, and leaving her with a warning

not to go out to the front part of the house, though the back, with the great rocks overhanging, was safe enough, I left her, and went upon an anxious errand. It was to the chapel to see the supposed remains of the Earl's daughter carried away to its final resting place. My heart smote me as I saw the weeping servants and the childless man standing round the coffin. But a glance at her lately intended husband satisfied me that I did well to hold my peace. The father, too, looked stern and cold. It may have been his way of showing grief, but I did not like his look. Glad was I when the whole party disappeared with their empty coffin from our valley. Then I felt that I could breathe; Gretchen, too, seemed glad, and now she was all my own dear little sister. Yet I still

feared that some one from the hotel might recognize her, so we never went out but in the early morning or by the moonlight. My fear of this, however, began to die away, for the perpetual change in hotel life shortens the memory, and the doings and belongings of an obscure carpenter could scarcely attract the attention of the busy people of the hotel.

“Another anxiety soon began to prey upon my mind. My dear lady, I began to fear, was scarcely strong enough even to stand our short rambles in the early morning, or in the late evening. She did not strengthen in spite of all my care. Often was she seized by a strange faintness, and I feared that her former mysterious illness might return. She said she had always been delicate, but that she had never felt

the same illness till she came to La Porte d'Or. I often feared that she might be sinking out of life for want of proper medical care. Yet what could I do? The only doctor at hand was one that had shown himself, she said, quite incapable of understanding what he was about. I knew him to be worse than useless in any out-of-the-way illness. Besides, he had already seen her, and no one who had seen her could easily forget her. To bring a doctor from four miles off would call attention to there being illness in the house, and illness of a severe nature. Old Madame La Harpe was far from well. She was gradually sinking from the incurable complaint—old age; but she would see no doctor, and though our neighbours up at the hotel took little notice

of us generally, they were kindly folk, and would never hear of illness in our small household without taking some interest in us.

“But come what would I began to feel that something must be done soon. My love, my life, my more than life, what would my life be without her? I began to meditate upon whether I could go off to the town to which I had been sent to bring the doctor from, when she lay dying, and once more claim his assistance. He had not seen Gretchen, and knew nothing of her or of me, and I must risk something. I had another errand besides bringing back the doctor. Gretchen had, I noticed, been eyeing with some interest the brilliant ring which she wore on her finger. Every now and then

she began to speak as if she wished to tell me something, then the words died away on her lips.

“ At length it came out one evening when I had carried her out to sit beside me at the door of my workshop. I had made a chair for her, and had fitted it up with skins of animals, soft and warm, and amongst her pillows she lay back and talked to me as I worked, or sometimes, after work, I read to her such books as I had. Here we were free from all intrusion, and as the days were beginning to grow a little colder she was sheltered from rough winds, and could breathe the sweet air without being afraid of any chill. She said —

“ ‘ Are you busy, dear ? ’

“ ‘ No, never too busy to talk to you.’

“‘ Ah, but I know you have to be busy. You have now to do double work, both for me and yourself. I promised to be a help to you, but I grow more of a log every day.’

“‘ It is the joy and delight of my life to work for you. I work harder now simply because, having you to care for, my work has become a pleasure. You need not fear I shall die of want or over-work. I am a thrifty German, so do not fear for me.’

“‘ I know you are thrifty. I should not have been so cared for if you had not been. But, ah, Fritz, it is not that you supply my wants which makes me feel so thankful to you, like as if I were a greedy dog, but it is the way you do it. If you only knew what kind words like yours are to a hungry heart that has pined for

kindness and gentleness all its life as mine has done. I think I could live on nothing but kindness. Did you ever hear of anyone eating kindness ?’

“ ‘I would be glad if you would eat your bread-and-butter.’

“ ‘Now, come for a few moments and sit beside me. This ring that you see upon my finger I ought, I suppose, to keep it and give it back or send it back to the giver. I cannot do that. Besides it is my own; it was given to me by one who might have given me dozens of such gifts, and I suspect would never have felt it. Then he has one ring of mine. I am no great judge of such things. I never viewed it with mercenary eyes till now. I suspect this ring is more valuable than the one I gave him. I can-

not work yet, but I hope, when I get stronger, that I shall work so as to buy my own clothes, and you will tell me what to do. In the meantime, I should like to get myself some more clothes, such as your sister would wear. Are there shops in the place you are going to where you could sell this ring, and get me what I want. I think this ring is worth some money. I think the original owner was generous with his money, and if he knew I, or anyone else, was in want, he would not grudge them help.'

"I took the ring from her hand and examined it. A savage feeling of joy filled my mind, to think that she could so lightly part with this splendid gift. Would she, I wondered, part from anything that I could give her so easily? I smiled as I thought of the little

village shops that I was going to, and the chance of their giving the value of one of the smallest stones in the ring. Its proper price would buy up their whole stock. In spite of her being a great Count's daughter, she seemed as ignorant as a child about its value. For myself, I knew a little about precious stones, an uncle of mine had been a working jeweller in a great town in Germany, and these beautiful wares of his had interested me much ; I had learnt a good deal about their nature and their value, and these beautiful specimens, one could see at once, were of the purest sort. I handed it back to her, mentally settling with myself that she should not part with the ring, and yet should have the clothes.

“ ‘ Ah,’ I said, ‘ I must see about that

soon. You cannot continue wearing old Madame La Harpe's clothes and my old fur cloak.'

"I fear I had made rather free with my landlady's wardrobe. She had a good stock of clothes that she would never wear out on this side the grave, and I could, and had already made up to her any wear and tear that Gretchen's use of them might cause.

" 'You must have some proper clothes, but I dare not take you with me, and yet I dread leaving you for so long a time, for I must, I fear, be gone the whole day nearly, and how could I know the things you would want!'

" 'I have been thinking of that. I fear I must take my chance; I must keep myself very quiet here while you are away, and I shall write out what it is I want, and if you

give it to some decent woman-creature in a shop, and say your sister is too ill to come, she will surely help you.'

" ' This ring I see is of great value, so write out freely what you want; it will pay for it over and over again.'

" ' Yes, I was sure it was of great value.'

" She told me with much simplicity how it came into her possession. I was glad to feel that what reluctance she had to parting from it was due more to a feeling that it was the gift of a friend than a lover. This reluctance she had overcome evidently by a consideration for my purse. She could not bear to be a burden on me, but I decided that she should not part from her ring, and yet should have her clothes. I agreed, however, for the present to take the precious

ornament with me. I was glad she should thus entrust it to my care, for a fear had sometimes crossed me. The poor man who would live honourably is liable to greater insults to his honour than the rich man, and I knew how lightly people would suspect that my most lucky visit to the chapel that night was dictated by a low, thievish desire for the jewel. A terror seized me sometimes that this thought might sometimes cross my Gretchen's mind. People who would long hesitate to suspect the Sir Laidlaw, or the great Earl her father, would easily suspect me, and perhaps with reason, for where there is temptation there is oftener sin, but we forget to think that where is temptation there ought to be excuse also. For me, however, I wanted

no excuse, nor did I want suspicion. I had forgotten the existence of the ring. I took it from her hand, and put it carefully away, and she wrote down what she wanted in French. I noticed that though she had not been cared for as I should have cared for her, she had been well instructed, very well; I wish I had had the same advantage. She handed me the paper. I knew the shopkeepers about all this part talked exclusively French, a language I had a difficulty in making myself understood in; still I did pretty well, and was improving with practice. The next morning I started on my short journey. I had said nothing to Madame La Harpe about my absence, for I feared she had a little habit of prying about if she knew I was safely out of reach for some

time. True, she could not have got in. My doors and windows were all locked, and the keys left in Gretchen's charge with strict directions to listen to no appeals unless made in my voice. I feared, though, that the old lady might prowl about and alarm her. I had to start very early in the morning and hoped that I might get back before the world was very busy. When I reached our little 'biggest' town I entrusted Gretchen's paper to a pleasant-looking woman in a shop that I went into, the one that seemed to me the best in the place. I found she had been in Germany and could talk a little German, and, between my little French and her little German, we got on well enough. I told her the things were for a sister who was too ill to come herself; she seemed interested, so I

asked her something about the doctor in the place. Ah, she considered him a wonderful man, at least her townspeople considered him so; for herself, she was thankful she had good health and never wanted his aid. I confess I had not liked the little I had seen of him. Still, something must be done for Gretchen.

“ ‘ Ah, it is a pity you could not take her to see the great Dr. Lehmann at the Hotel de Belle Vue. I hear he has come for his health, and he is a countryman of yours. He goes through to La Porte d’Or to-day. You’ll have heard of him; I am told he is wonderful. But when he is out travelling for his health he may not like to be disturbed.’

“ ‘ Dr. Lehmann? Is he here? The great Dr. Lehmann from Paris? He was a townsman of mine, but he went to Paris I heard.’

“ ‘ Yes, that is he; he is at the top of the tree now.’

“ ‘ Ah, if my sister could see him ! But we working folk must be contented with something less than that. All the great people are running after him.’

“ ‘ Well, I’ve heard he does wonders. I would not be down-hearted ; I would go straight to him.’

“ I shook my head, but as I took my parcel from her and paid her bill the thought returned and returned to me. ‘ What a chance for Gretchen if I could get his advice.’ I knew that he was a really skilful man, and a kind one. But how could I manage it ? I put the thought away from me, but it kept returning. However, one result came from my conversation with the woman. I never went

near the doctor of the place, but went straight home, and arrived sooner than Gretchen expected me. Her welcome filled my heart to overflowing. Ah, me, I knew too well, though, that her regard for me was too outspoken to be deep. I knew that her affection for me was but the kindly friendship of a great lady for her faithful servant, such as she might have felt for one of the villagers at her father's gates. I dared not show what I felt for her. I had to hide it deep down, far out of sight. Her sweet eyes were wells of love and modest gratitude, but I had seen her lying in sleep, and in the sleep of death, and the level eyebrows, dark as night, and the curve of her mouth warned me that in sleep, at any rate, was the memory of the proud race from which she sprang. I feared—I knew,

in fact—that it wanted but a touch to rouse it up. It was not sleeping in death; it would awake there too, I fancied. What right but my own terrors had I to fancy such things about my dear love I do not know. She never showed me anything but kindness and undue gratitude. However, I felt it safer on my part never to overstep the bounds of a modest respect. I think this helped towards the perfect freedom with which she treated me. She had nothing to fear. We called each other brother and sister, but if I had taken any of the privileges of a brother I suspect she would have crept into her shell, and a grim wall of partition would have been built up between us. I felt a secret satisfaction, after having handed over to her her packet of new clothes, that I was able to put.

the magnificent ring once more upon her finger.

“ ‘Oh,’ said she, with a look of blank disappointment, ‘why did you not sell it?’

“ ‘She seemed so vexed, that, as I answered, I felt a little crestfallen. However, I had a satisfactory answer and a true one.

“ ‘Dear sister, I could not. Only a great jeweller in a great town could give you anything like the price for it. I believe it is a priceless gift. You must keep it on your finger, at any rate for the present. Some day you may want it, but not now.’

“ ‘And you have bought everything out of your own hard-earned savings and toil. Oh, Fritz! I wish you had sold it, and let me feel that I was not such a pauper.’

“ ‘She fairly cried. I could scarcely bear it.

To see the tears coursing one after the other down her cheek ! She looked so feeble, so young, so like an innocent child. The temptation to take her in my arms and comfort her as one does a child, was very strong. Thank God, I resisted.

“‘Nay,’ I said, getting no further than taking her thin, white lady’s hand in my hard-working brown one, “why will you grudge me this little bit of pleasure ? You will soon get well, and this white lily thing that you call a hand will help me in the delicate carving business. There are lots of work to do that you will be fit for, so you must get well and help me. And if I am ill some day you shall work for me, and keep me in food and raiment. Oh, I shall work you very hard when you are well. At present you must keep quiet.’

“She let me hold her dear hand in mine, but I think she was hardly aware where it was. She lay back on her pillows, crying softly till she cried herself to sleep.

“Yes, something must be done. If I were to lose her—‘Let me not think on’t. That way madness lies.’ No! neither madness, which may perhaps wipe out memory, nor death, ever comes to the broken-hearted. Only in plays and novels does such oblivion as death come. No, there would be weary, weary, weary life, without a ray of light to cheer me. She shall live—she must live. I at length determined to see this German doctor. He might rebuff me. It was very likely, for a doctor must have a holiday like everybody else. But I would take my chance. I remembered seeing him, when I was a boy

and he a young student, coming home to his father's house, flushed with his brilliant career at the University where he was studying. It was not likely that he had ever heard my name even, for we were in very different walks in life, but sometimes the sight of a fellow-countryman in a strange land softens the heart. The sound of one's native tongue is a bond of union between two people who have no other bond between them.

“There were still some additions going on at the hotel, and I did all the carpentering business, so I had an opportunity of asking one of the chamber-maids who was in the house at that time. She mentioned one or two people, amongst others the great German physician, Dr. Lehmann. He had arrived the day before. She mentioned some of his

peculiarities—I forget what they were—but they evidently struck her more than his fame as a physician.

“The fact that he had arrived was enough for me, and an hour or two afterwards I met him coming out of the house. I could trace the young man’s face that I had seen passing our shop, in the quiet, pleasant, thoughtful, middle-aged face. He was wandering down the road towards the lake, as I, with my bag of tools on my back, overtook him on my homeward journey. Now was my time. I might be repulsed, but I said, for the hundredth time, “something must be done.” He was examining the flowers that grew in the clefts of the rock as I passed. My courage seemed to fail me. The fear of a decided ‘No,’ and so finding that I had nothing

more to hope from him, closed my mouth. I was basely giving up the attempt, when a voice from amongst the rocks above asked me in French which was the nearest way to get to the other side of the lake. At once I replied in German that I could not speak much French, but if he understood German I would explain the road to him in my own language.

“I saw, to my joy, how he at once seemed to brighten up, and stepping lightly down from his platform he shook me warmly by the hand. He said he had not often the delight of hearing his own language spoken, now that he had settled in Paris, and his heart always yearned towards a countryman. He asked me what town I came from. I told him. ‘Ah, it was his dear native place.’ He

was full of questions about the old people there whom he remembered. I could generally satisfy his curiosity, for I had not long left the place. He was so full of enquiries that I found no room to speak of the subject nearest to my heart. But now we had reached the bottom of the hill, and our paths lay in different directions. Now must I make the plunge, and it was easier now than before. But the question arose in my mind—should I tell him our whole story, and trust to his honour, or should I make up a fiction about her being my sister? What should I do? I determined wisely to tell him the truth as far as I told him anything. Part of the story I must keep back; but I should let him know that part of it was kept back. He was a man keen-sighted, sharp as a needle, and

would have seen through any deceits at once. So I settled, and settled wisely, to tell him the true version, as far as it went, and trust to his honour. Also, I settled to tell him as little as I could.

“‘Sir,’ I said, ‘if I am not mistaken, you are the great Dr. Lehmann, of Paris, of whom our town is so justly proud?’

“‘I am certainly Dr. Lehmann, and I live in Paris, and if our native town is proud of me, I hope it is justly proud; but pray, my good fellow, is there anything in my line that I can do for you? You look as if there was. I make a rule always to keep clear of all doctoring when I am out on a holiday; but it does not fall to my lot to meet a townsman often, and I don’t mind stretching a point for you, my good fellow.’

“ ‘Thank you, sir, I am quite well myself; but there is something that lies much nearer to my thoughts than myself just now, and if anyone could help me, you could.’

“ ‘Ah, indeed, what is it?’

“ ‘Well, before I tell you, will you solemnly give me a promise to let the matter lie between us two? I ask for no charitable gift, either of advice or anything else. Thank God, I have no need of that; we Germans are a thrifty lot.’

“ ‘That we are,’ said the Doctor, with that national pride or vanity which comes to people after they have lived long out of their own country.

“ ‘I want no charity-visiting of my sick, though I know I am asking a great favour, seeing that you are now taking your holiday,

and for that favour you shall have my heart-felt thanks.'

" 'Come along with me, my man, and tell me what it is; we need not stand here.'

" 'Underneath my roof is a young girl whom I rescued from the most awful fate that perhaps a human being could be exposed to,' I said, as we sauntered slowly along.

" I then ran over as shortly as possible the events which had led me to be her deliverer. I carefully and confessedly concealed her name, her country, and her rank, and I passed over in silence the reason that had taken me to her side on that awful night. I don't think the Doctor would have understood my reason for being there, and there was no cause why I should not have been taking a walk by the shores of the lake.

“ ‘Now, sir,’ I said, ‘she cannot and will not return to her own home. Though I tell you she is a young lady of high rank, far, far above me, I have not only saved her from death, but from a fate she dreads almost more than death. Though I am now her only protector, she is as safe under my roof as if she were with her mother, or as if I were her real brother, if people will only leave her with me. But I fear sometimes I shall not keep her in this world long.’ And here something rose in my throat, something suddenly gripped at my heart, that made the tears rise in my eyes when I thought what it would be to lose her. It stood out a horrible reality, more distinct than it had ever done before, as I spoke of it. No gulping down would stop the womanly show of my feelings

to this entire stranger. He looked with examining eyes through his spectacles at me, not entirely without sympathy, but as if I were possessed of some curious disease that he took a professional pleasure in studying.

“ ‘Young man,’ he said, clapping me kindly on the shoulder, ‘you are running yourself into a great danger. You say this girl is above you in rank. Is she much above you?’ ”

“ ‘Yes, very much.’ ”

“ ‘My advice is, get rid of her. I can help her to a home amongst people more of her own class and sex.’ ”

“ ‘Good God, sir ! this is not the advice I asked for. I want advice about her health.’ ”

“ ‘And I give you this advice into the bargain. It shall all be included in my fee, which you are so eager to pay. You stupid

fellow, you say you call each other brother and sister. Nonsense. Listen to me. If she is a lady born and bred, between you and her there is a great gulf fixed. You cannot cross it and go to her, and she will never, can never come over to you. You will be the sufferer. You will wear your heart out for the love of her. *Will* wear, did I say? Why, you *are* wearing out that good honest organ with vain longing for her love, and she!—why she will look up to you with mock humility, or she will look down upon you with patronising gratitude. Yes, she will tell you a great deal about her gratitude, and she will sing your praises from morning till evening, and tell you what a fine fellow you are. One thing she will never do, you silly young man.'

“ ‘What is that ?’ I said, sorrowfully, for some things sounded very like reality.

“ ‘She will never put herself on an equality with you.’

“ ‘That may well be the case. Were I a king and she a queen, or even the humblest of my handmaidens, she would be my superior. But now I simply want an answer to this question : Can you, and will you, give us the benefit of your medical advice during your present holiday time ?’

“ ‘Yes, certainly. I am curious to see your young tyrant, and I suspect I shall be rewarded for my trouble by finding an interesting case from a medical point of view. But as you wish to conceal her for the present from public notice, to avoid any inconvenient enquiries, I shall come, first of all, at

any rate, after dark. A walk by moonlight is always pleasant.'

" 'To-night, then ?'

" 'Yes, to-night.'

" 'Remember, I neither tell you her name, her country, nor her rank. She is to you but Gretchen Hübner.'

" 'Trust me ; I pry into no unnecessary secrets.'

" 'Thank you. Then this evening.'

" 'Yes.'

" I went home with a lighter heart, though still most anxious. Gretchen seemed to me weaker than she was before, and she was full of terror about the new doctor. He would betray her to her people ; and then I had to reason her out of the old trouble about the expense she was causing me.

“ At length I talked her over to my side of the question.

“ ‘ Oh, Fritz,’ she said as I left her, ‘ how can I ever express the gratitude I feel for all you do ? ’

“ ‘ Oh, don’t talk so much of gratitude,’ I said, with so much anger in my tone that I hoped afterwards she had not noticed it.

“ Setting aside my terrors for her life, I sometimes wonder now, as I look back, if my life was really happy then, whether it was as happy as in the dull old days when Madame La Harpe’s companionship was all I had. To wild fits of castle-building would often succeed days of gloomy depression ; I, who never had troubled to suspect any man or woman, who took them as I found them, and as long as they dealt fairly with me had

little mind to dissect their conduct, how had I now got to weigh every look, every word of hers?—to see in this word a hint that I had over-stepped the bounds of our different stations; to see in that a warning that she was from some fine china workshop—I was but a poor homely, earthen pot? Yet, through it all, how I loved her! Sometimes I was half inclined to lay my case before her, and to tell her how, for the protection of her own honour from the evil tongue of the world, and to guard her against the danger of being claimed by some of her own kith and kin, a marriage with me was the safest plan. Thank Heaven, these thoughts were but idle wanderers through my brain. No, I would never by base threats urge upon her a marriage with me.

“ At length the day passed, and as evening drew in I heard a tap at my window pane, and, after a few words of preparation, I introduced Dr. Lehmann into Gretchen’s chamber. His keen eye seemed to take her in at a glance, and I saw a pitying expression in his face as he turned round to me. It seemed to speak of no hope. I left him with Gretchen, who preferred talking in German to him, as she had now got to talk it well and understand it perfectly. I was glad that, as I had before discovered, he knew nothing at all of English, and I had warned Gretchen not to let out more than she could of her past history, and she was far too frightened herself not to be careful of betraying our secret.

"After a little while he joined me. My heart beat quickly as he entered.

" 'There is no hope,' I said, catching hold of his arm.

" 'Why do you say that?'

" 'I saw by your face, by the look of pity on your face. There is no hope—none whatever.'

" 'You mistook my look, though I tell you she is very ill. But my pity was for you, poor simpleton. What! have you lost your senses, man? Can you look in the glass and see yourself, a good honest workman, and perhaps a clever carpenter—they tell me up at the inn you are that—and ask yourself if you are likely to bring down an angel from the skies to be your bride?

Heavens! man, why she will find some wealthy idiot, some descendant of a thousand ancestors; some idiot not half your worth, perhaps, still her own equal, and will pair off with him. Don't be down-hearted. Look out for some thrifty German wife who will do well by you. She is not a German—I see that.'

“‘Then it was for me that look of pity was on your face?’ I said, more cheerfully, though his speech was not complimentary.

“‘Well, she is very ill; but what is the matter with her I know about as much as you do. It puzzles me more than I care to own. Something I have got at. She tells me she never had a trance in her life before, nor had ever shown any tendencies in her constitution that could lead one to expect

such a development. She tells me she has been delicate all her life, but I fancy that may have been due partly to want of medical care in early life, and partly to her having spent that time in some rude, ungenial climate, whose harsh winters and spring-time may have been ill-suited to such a tender plant. Still, with care, she has not such a bad constitution to work upon underneath. But I must not disguise from you that I am at present quite in the dark about her, and must see her again before giving any opinion. He hesitated for a minute. 'I will not deny that a theory about her illness has crossed my mind, but it would be wrong to give it words till I see more of her. I am deeply interested in the case—deeply interested in her. Certainly Heaven has been

cruel in sending such a temptation for you to wreck your happiness upon.'

"He said he would call the next day, but refused all information as to what his theory was. He must, he said, think over the subject first. His last words were again to offer an asylum for Gretchen more fitted for her rank and sex, and an assurance that he thought there was more hope of her recovery than I had fancied.

"I went back to my sister and found her lying with her face buried in her pillows. I thought she was asleep, so turned to go out at the door. But as I was closing it behind me I thought I heard a smothered sob. I returned.

"'Gretchen,' I said, 'speak, my little girl. What distresses you?'

“She tried to pretend that she was still asleep, but her sobs broke out at length with uncontrollable violence.

“‘What is it?’ I said, raising her up upon my arm. ‘Speak, child, and tell me why you weep thus.’

“‘Oh, Fritz! I must go away; he said I must.’

“‘What right has he to say that?’

“‘I am making you poor. I shall bring trouble upon you, and—and—oh, please go away and leave me. I shall be better to-morrow.’

“‘Little sister Gretchen, would it grieve you to leave this poor, miserable place?’

“She made no answer, but threw herself down on the pillow, and her tears fell fast on it.

“‘You have answered me,’ I said. ‘We must not part till you wish it. You will soon be well with this man’s help, and then you will help me in many ways. For one thing, you shall teach me.’

“She looked up with a laugh through her tears.

“‘Teach you ! Why, what can I teach you, you great, hulking schoolboy ?’

“‘Many things. You have learnt to draw, you can teach me English. There are, oh, many things in which you have had better teaching than I could ever have had ; and these things you shall give me help in. I shall not be an idle pupil.’

“‘Ah, I see through you, you glass house. You will always be putting your poor prim governess to shame by getting on so much

faster than she can hop along on her poor wooden legs.'

" 'That will certainly be my desire. But the first thing is to get well. This man comes to-morrow. You are very tired, so go to sleep, my sister. Good-night, and God bless you.'

"She held out her hand, only her hand. Might I not kiss her as I bid her good-night? I hesitated, but only for a moment. I pressed her hand, and left the room. I was thankful that I had not been tempted into any such over-stepping of the bounds I had set myself. Her gentle 'Good-night, God bless you' followed me as I passed into my little work house, where I slept—sweet sounds, dearer to me than the most heavenly music.

"The next day the doctor came, true to his

time. I was thankful that he seemed no longer inclined to give advice outside his professional line, but after paying a very long visit to his patient, he came to me and said —

“ ‘Now, Hübner, there is a question I want to ask you. You say Gretchen was very unhappy in her own home, and that she would have been forced into a marriage against her wishes?’

“ ‘Yes, you are right. That is the case.’

“ ‘Then, have you any idea that, from fear of the fate that was overhanging her, she ever tried to take her own life?’

“ ‘In what way?’

“ ‘Well,’ said the doctor, ‘by poison.’

“ ‘I started with horror at such an idea.

“ ‘Good heavens, no ! I am sure she never did.’

“‘But how can you tell? You know little more about her than I do.’

“‘Ah, I know enough about her to know that she would never do that.’

“‘Nay, don’t tell me! However, I think if she did try that on she will not do it again. She has had a fright. But the case still puzzles me. My practice has been amongst cures, not poisons. If I had her under my dissecting-knife, I could arrive at something more definite; but as I cannot yet dispose of her in that way, we must grope about a little in the dark. Our work would be much simplified if you would worm yourself into her confidence, and find out what she has been doing.’

“‘I cannot think she would do it.’

“‘Did you ever hear if there was anyone

whose interest it was to put her out of the world ?’

“I hesitated. My thoughts flew at once to the governess with the glittering eyes ; but was I right to throw suspicion upon a woman because her eyes glittered, and were the colour of a leech’s back ? I did not like her eyes, but she had not made them herself, so I contented myself with saying —

“‘I shall ask Gretchen. She tells me most things.’

“‘Do. I feel convinced I was right at first, and that it was no trance. Without the information she alone can give, I must work in the dark. Still, I shall try the experiment of treating the case. If the remedies succeed, we may conclude that my idea is right. We must watch her narrowly,

for if I am wrong, my treatment may be the reverse of a cure, and must be stopped at once. But, fortunately, we can stop it before much harm is done. I wish my friend Janson were here; he knows more about poisons than anyone living, I believe. But he is travelling in the East. However, for the present, find out what you can for yourself. I must write to Paris for the necessary medicines. I hope sincerely they may have an effect. This young visitor from the grave interests me much.'

"That evening, as I sat beside Gretchen working at some wooden frames that I was carving, I led the conversation round to some of the events which had happened before her final release from her father's tyranny. She spoke quite freely to me, and showed me that

her life had been sufficiently wretched to warrant her quitting his roof. Finally, I asked her the question directly which the doctor had wished me to ask: Had she ever, in any sudden panic, or horror at the fate in store for her, attempted to take her own life? She laughed in my face—such a merry child's laugh that it was quite answer enough.

“‘No, brother Fritz. I am too great a coward to fly to such a sensational mode of getting rid of my troubles.’

“‘Is there anyone whose interest would induce them to try such a dreadful deed?’

“‘How dolefully solemn you look! No! I know no one but yourself who would be interested in getting rid of me; but then it seems I won't go. If anyone was odd enough to want me to go into my grave, thank good-

ness they have got their wish. On the 24th of May the Lady Margaret Laidlaw departed this life, R.I.P., and a few days after was born into this world Gretchen Hübner, Fritz Hübner the carpenter's sister. So I am nearly two months old.'

" 'Nay, but Gretchen, you must be serious; the doctor wants an answer.'

" 'Well, tell him I did not poison myself, and I don't think I was of sufficient importance for people to peril their necks for.'

" 'I did not like the look of your governess.'

" 'Oh, but she was beautiful—beautiful as a—well, as a serpent, I own; but she was beautiful. I could not endure her, and it used to make me angry that I had to acknowledge how beautiful she was.'

" 'I did not think her beautiful. I have

only seen one beautiful person in the world.'

“ ‘Happy Fritz ! I have seen many, and I did not like what I saw of them. Poor Fräulein ! Her story was sad enough, I believe. I ought not to add to its sadness by taxing her with poisoning me. Rather, I think, it was I that poisoned her life. The man that gave me that ring might, I do believe, have made her a happy woman, and, I believe, a better one. Ah, if I had only known how weak he was, how vain I was. He was ambitious, I fancy, a bad sort of ambition, and was caught by my rank, for rank is a snare to people like him. And I was vain. Ah, Fritz, I wish I had been as good and honest as you. To think that my vanity has ruined a woman’s life.’ ”

“ ‘Well, it was not altogether your rank that spoilt her life.’

“ ‘I think it was. Ah, it is that which makes me love to be your sister—a carpenter’s sister. When I was my old self I never knew if people loved me for myself, or because I was the chief lady in the country side, excepting Janet. She never cared what I was, but scolded or petted me as the fancy took her. Dear Janet.’

“ I at once changed the subject, for I feared any tender remembrance of her old attendant.

“ ‘This poor little place must be a great difference to you. But some day when you are well, and poor old Madame, next door, has passed away—which, I fear, will soon happen now—we must move off into some

other place. To be so near the lake I hardly think is good for you."

"‘Ah, it is a sweet little place; I love it much. The great Castle, with its gloomy galleries and great echoing empty rooms, seemed to me full of ghosts and terrible sounds. Here there are no ghosts, but all is bright and cheerful. Even at night I hear you whistling over your work, and the tap, tap of your hammer on the poor heads of the nails seems to drive away every ghostly creature. And how the cruel winds nipped my poor shivering body up! The sweet, pure air here seems to be quite different. Oh, I should like to get well! Life seems as if there was some use living it.’

"‘And you shall get well! you must get

well ! The doctor ought to be here soon. I have confidence in him.'

"At last he came, and I told him all our conversation that was necessary for him to know. He listened patiently.

"Nevertheless, I believe she has been poisoned. However she came by it I cannot say, but I think some slow process of poisoning has been going on—some bungling hand has been at work. Mixed up with such a terrible household as you describe, how can she tell what devilish arts some of them may have resorted to to get rid of her ? They have used some strange combination of drugs that I have no doubt Janson knows more about than I do ; but they have not calculated upon the strength of her constitution. She

is not so delicate as she seems. In some way, I fancy, they have not been bold enough. They have aimed at too gradual an effect, but the thing has missed fire, producing a death-like sleep, but not death. Thank Heaven you were taking your moonlight walk that night. But now, acting upon my idea, we must begin with caution. This may be a kill or cure remedy, but we may stop it before it gets to the killing stage.'

"He then described to me minutely the effect, if it was working on an unsuitable soil. I was instantly to stop it. He impressed the same upon Gretchen; we were not to be alarmed. If it was the proper remedy, it would be slow and gradual in its proceedings. He was staying on another fortnight in the place, so I felt more con-

fidence left alone with these powerful drugs. It was with fear and trembling, I watched the effect of the first few doses. There seemed to be no effect at all to begin with, and I thought all must be well. Then I thought I detected a change for the worse. My heart sank within me, for I had hoped so much; but as I was hesitating whether at once to stop the medicine or to try another dose, oh, joy! I fancied that I felt my darling's pulse beat higher, and a shadow like pink seemed to be stealing into her cheek. Then she seemed to fall back, the doctor seemed scarcely to know himself whether to continue the medicine or not. But at length, oh, happy day, as I returned from my work, my Gretchen met me at the door.

“ ‘Look,’ she said, ‘I have walked to meet

you ; I have a feeling as if a weight were lifted off me ; I feel that I shall live !’

“ Hard it was that in my joy I could do no more than put out my hand to steady her steps. The doctor was now quite certain that his theory was right, and that he was on the right road, that Janson would have entirely approved of his treatment. She now improved rapidly, and began to wear a look of health. She told me that the new strength that seemed dawning for her was an absolutely unknown and unbelievable feeling hitherto.

“ ‘ I am getting a rude healthy country girl, a great red-faced blousy lass. You need not get poetical any longer about your poor sister Gretchen.’

“ But that was not so. Health only added

to her looks, and to my delight in her presence.

“A new life seemed opening to us; old Madame La Harpe had died, and we were free to go where we chose, and where I could get work. I still feared that, staying in the neighbourhood of the hotel, Gretchen would some day be recognised. We had been careful not to run any risks, and her ill-health had kept her out of sight. Naturally old Madame La Harpe, weakened both in mind and body, had accepted without question the presence of my sister. But now I felt that the time for quitting our lovely valley was drawing near.

“It was with sorrowful eyes that we looked our last on the beautiful spot which

from that time has been but a memory to us both. But I was greatly consoled by the feeling that for my dear charge the change was in every way a benefit. She grew healthier and happier every day. The pleasant feeling that she was in every way more than able to return all that I had done for her was a great consolation to her healthy independence. She had been better trained to share a workman's cottage than might have been expected. For this Janet had been a good instructress in many household matters. She was the pride and delight of my heart, but as I looked at the stately maiden that ruled our little home there ever grew and grew the sore spot in my heart, and the words of the doctor came even

clearer and more distinctly to my mind—
‘There is a great gulf fixed between you and
her. She will be your kind mistress, or
even your humble slave, but your equal,
never.’

CHAPTER IV.

“I HAD settled in a large town in my own country, and I had started a cabinet-maker’s shop, over which we lived very happily. Our neighbours and townspeople were too busy to take much notice of me or my sister. We thought it better to make no friends or acquaintances, though, as my business increased, an assistant would have been a great help. However, I got on very well, and before many months had passed my

shop became well known for the wood carvings which I was able to display. I had taken much pleasure in this sort of work, for Gretchen had admired it so much. She tried her own clever hands upon it, and did some nice things, which I sold for her. But her chief delight was in our little house. I had great difficulty in insisting on doing the rougher parts of the work myself. We feared to keep a gossiping servant, though our lives were as blameless as two little children's lives; but we dreaded the outer world. We called ourselves brother and sister, but the fact was plain to anyone who heard our voices that we were not of the same nation. Troublesome thoughts sometimes forced themselves in upon me. Was I right to keep her with me? What if some

unlooked-for event might let in the light of day or the light of an ill-speaking world upon us? Would not this darling of my heart be the sufferer? I, the strong man, able to bear the sneers and contempt of my fellow-men with an unblushing face, would most likely be left unmolested, but she, the poor fragile snowdrop! what would become of her if rudely torn away from this sheltered corner? I, however strong my arm, however steadfast my heart, would be utterly powerless to save her from the contempt that would greet her. She herself was far too ignorant of the world to dread it. The offer of the doctor to find her a suitable home amongst women of her own rank, or at least education and nurture, often came up to me, but I put it away. It

was evidently not her own wish, and her wish was more to me than all the evil-speaking, lying, and slandering that might bawl itself hoarse in this world.

“Our evenings were the happiest times. Then she would sit with her work, good useful household work, and charm me with her vivid descriptions of lands I had never seen. Or she would instruct me in English. Sometimes she would repeat English poetry to me, and though then I could not always catch the exact meaning, the music of her voice had a charm of its own. I felt every day that I was growing less and less able to mingle with the hard-headed, strong-boned folk who were my natural companions. Her queenly presence seemed to throw a glory all around and make my little house look as if

it contained all the treasures of an eastern palace. To her teaching I owe my first real knowledge of drawing. I had certainly taught myself a little, my eye was correct, and my fingers were good servants. But that knave governess had been a clever woman and had known how to instruct. Gretchen was not long in proudly announcing that her pupil had got quite ahead of her. Perhaps she was right, I think she was. I think an eye for beauty has been more strongly developed in me than in her.

“Now I must come to the most memorable day in my life. It was my twenty-ninth birthday. Gretchen, when I left her in the morning, was full of trying her hand on some cake she had seen Janet bake, as an

especial treat. It was to be eaten at our evening meal when I came home from my work. She had made one or two attempts in preparation, but they had been failures. Some sin, she said, of omission or commission, had appeared before her in the middle of the night, and she thought she would now succeed by avoiding this.

“I had to go to the other part of our town to carry home a piece of carved work which had been bought, leaving my shop in charge of an old man whom I had had to employ lately, for I was determined that Gretchen should never appear in the capacity of a saleswoman. Her unusual beauty would soon have filled my shop with customers, but I preferred trusting to the attractions of my own work rather than to this piece of

nature's handiwork, perfect though it was. I was on my way home when, in passing a shop with some fancy goods in the window, my eye was attracted by a necklace of blue-glass beads. I knew they were but glass, or some equally cheap material, but the colour and form were beautiful. In point of simple beauty I doubted if anything in the fashionable jeweller's opposite could compete with that necklace. Still I had learnt that women of Gretchen's rank value jewels not so much for their beauty as for their price. Nay, that it is considered vulgar and in bad taste, that it is even untruthful to do otherwise. She told me, however, one night that some great ladies would not object to wear paste-stones instead of real diamonds, for fear of losing them; but then they must be known

to be possessed of the real diamonds, which were, perhaps, safely in a jeweller's shop, or some place, at any rate, where thieves do not break through and steal.

“She is not quite sure of this, though, for she says she has seen little of those great people to whom by her birth she belongs. I am but a plain workman, and to me a pretty thing is a pretty thing, whether it costs a thousand or a few shillings. Gretchen has sometimes tried to teach me differently, and says it is not so much their costliness that people prize, but they do not like to wear shams. This may be so, and I do not dispute it with her. Perhaps she might think it was only a common working man's want of taste. I sometimes fear in her presence I am losing all manly independence of thought. I hope-

not. One must be better, not worse, for even looking at her.

“ In the case of the necklace there was no sham. I don't think there is any natural jewel that has the same shade as that necklace. It was blue, but a peculiar blue. It struck my fancy wonderfully. How beautiful it would look upon her throat! I could see a stray, unruly chestnut lock getting entangled round it, the petulant action of her hands as she tried to free herself, and perhaps there would be a demand that I should help her.

“ ‘ What is the price ? ’ I asked.

“ I was ashamed to hear how small it was, but I could not have afforded any more. I paid it, and wrapped it in some silver paper to carry it home.

“As I got to the foot of my own little flight of stairs I saw Gretchen standing at the top of them, holding something on her arm. She had put on a clean, fresh cotton dress in honour of the occasion. It was one that the old woman who sometimes washed for us had not understood the management of, and she had taken all the colour out of it. I had heard Gretchen making great lamentations over it. The effect, however, at a very small distance, was that of a pure white dress. Her hair was partly tied back with a ribbon which was very much the colour of my necklace. Some stray, rebellious locks were hanging about her neck. She had been busy about some little household matters which had made her tuck the sleeves of her white dress over her elbow, and the

warm, round, soft arms were resting on the staircase, fit models for a Grecian sculptor.

“ ‘ Ah, there you are, dear Fritz. I have been waiting for you, and feared you were detained. Your very step has music in it when you come up the stair. The cake is perfection ; and look what I have made you for your birthday ! Allow me to present you with a birthday gift, bought entirely with your own money. Are you not obliged ? However, the work is my own—every stitch. I cannot bear to see you in that shabby coat. You were so nice and tidy when I first saw you. Now I have come to eat you out of house and home, and you cannot buy yourself nice clothes. Look at the work. I’m a born tailor. Look at the button-

holes. Take off that old coat and try it on.'

"I was very grateful for her work. It was a well-made coat, and better fitted than I could have got. I was aware that my dress was getting rather old. My pleasure at the gift gave her great delight.

"'Oh, you do look decent now—quite a wise-like lad, as Tam Donaldson would say. What would he say, I wonder, if he thought this young lady was making coats for a "Jiner lad"?' "

"'What is the meaning of a Donaldson that I often hear you talk of, and what is a "Jiner lad," Gretchen?' "

"But she was too much taken up with admiring my coat to notice my question.

"'Now,' I said, 'I have a present for you.

I fear it is but a poor thing. It is sham, tinsel, what you like to call it ; but I thought it would look well beside thy dark locks.'

"I took it out of the paper and handed it to her. I need not have been afraid. She was my own gracious lady. Her happy, girlish pleasure at the little adornment was, indeed, delightful to me.

"'Oh, how good you are, Fritz. I have never had anything so pretty. You must fasten it on for me.'

"My heart beat with pleasure as I put it round her neck, and I was some little time before I quite found out how to fasten it. Meanwhile she laid hold of the collar of my coat and looked up at me with her matchless eyes. The tears seemed to gather in them as she thanked me over and over again for

my kind thought. The touch of nature was very dear to me; the womanly pleasure in the little bit of prettiness which we choose to miscall vanity touched me deeply. Could I help what I did? She had made such a point of our being brother and sister, that she seemed to me as if she had persuaded herself that I was verily and indeed her brother. Why might I not then take a brother's privilege? Once, when I fancied she was lying dead in her coffin, I had dared to kiss her. The memory of my presumption had often made me blush, and I had never repeated it. Once had she sent my heart flying like a mill wheel when she kissed me in the chapel. But that was a sort of figurative ceremony, an acknowledgment that in our extremest horror or happiness all men

and women are equal. She kissed me not as Friederich Hübner, but as the representative of the whole human race. But now, as I looked down upon her, the thought came into my head, I, Fritz Hübner, the carpenter, would kiss my sister Gretchen. I took her face between my hands, slowly I bent my head, and at length I kissed her forehead. Instantly I regretted it. I saw the red blood dash across her face, and the long eyelashes at once veiled her eyes that but a moment before had looked up to me with such confidence. I thought I saw the whole pride of the race from whence she sprang rise up against me. I turned sadly and awkwardly away from her. She busied herself about some real or pretended work, and I could not see her face again. I had

thus spoilt our happy evening. She would never have that perfect confidence in me again. Ah, it was all true that the doctor had said. I felt humbled; I felt hurt and angry. Why had she called me brother? Why was she to treat me with that easy familiar way and I was to keep my distance? Ah, me, some hard thoughts came into my head about her. I went down to my shop, for I felt I must keep my hands busy to keep my head from thinking. I pulled about the things, arranging and rearranging my goods. My face, my whole body, burnt and tingled with the unspoken rebuke.

“While I was thus busy with nothing really but angry thoughts, the shop door opened, and a lady entered and asked to

look at something that had taken her fancy, and which she had seen through the window. A handsome face she had, but it looked worn and anxious. It seemed familiar to me, and yet it was some minutes before I recognised its possessor as Gretchen's old German governess. Fortunately, she evidently had no recollection of me. My fears instantly suggested giving Gretchen a warning not to show herself by any chance to this woman. Unfortunately the discovery of who she was did not come into my mind until I was mounted on a ladder getting down, for her inspection, a rather heavy mirror set in carved ebony. I saw the reflection of the face in the glass, and it was *then* that I knew who she was. At the same moment I heard Gretchen's step outside upon our little staircase, and before I

could stop her, or say a word of warning to her, she stood in the doorway. My heart seemed to spring into my mouth, and I nearly let both the mirror and myself fall from the ladder. However, I seized tight hold of my handiwork, and by its help was witness to a curious scene. I had just begun to descend as Gretchen entered the shop. I saw her suddenly transfixed with horror, standing in the doorway, all the colour gone out of her cheek. She must have looked as ghastly white as when this woman's eyes last looked upon her. A white towel had been loosely thrown over her head for the tidy purpose of keeping herself clean as she mended the fire in the stove. What with this and her white dress, a maiden attired for her wedding or for her grave could not be more purely

dressed. The only relief to this colourless appearance, if that could be called a relief, was a gleaming knife which she held, certainly in a very threatening attitude, but which, in reality, she had been doing nothing worse with than cutting into her first successful cake to see how it looked in the middle. But to a guilty conscience I could not imagine a more threatening-looking apparition. For a moment she stood in the doorway, and then vanished like lightning. From her most unfortunate appearance I was soon diverted by the behaviour of the other woman. She uttered a low gurgling sound in her throat, as if she were drowning, and then shrank shivering to a seat with her eyes fixed upon the door from which Gretchen had so suddenly vanished.

“ ‘What’s that?’ she hissed out, as if she was choking.

“ ‘What?’ I said.

“ ‘Did you not see her? did you not see her, man? My head will burst. I did not do it. She must have died, poor pale-faced thing, after, perhaps, after she had spoilt my— Oh, what am I talking of? Loose my bonnet strings; I am nervous. I have knotted them; they choke me. I beg your pardon; I am subject to tremblings. Ha! ha!’ she laughed with an affected giggle, ‘we poor women must amuse you; we are so subject to—to—’

“ ‘She seemed to forget what women were subject to, but I saw what she was subject to at that moment, and that was a horrible superstitious dread. Cruel as it might seem,

I was determined to play upon it, for the double purpose of saving Gretchen from discovery, and others from her wicked practices. It was a sudden danger I was brought face to face with. To hand her over to justice, even if I had had stronger proofs of her guilt, was what I could never have done. One reason alone was sufficient to prevent that. It would have exposed Gretchen to enquiring eyes and tongues. I think—nay, I am sure—I acted rightly.

“‘I saw no woman there,’ I said, as I helped to untie her strings, which she certainly had drawn into a tight knot.

“This statement was perfectly true, for my back had been to them the whole time; but even if my face had been to them I should have said the same, for, as Solomon

says, there is a time for everything, and this certainly was a time for telling a lie.

“ ‘ I saw no woman. There is no woman but yourself here.’

“ ‘ No? Oh, God ! I have sinned. She has haunted my dreams, the pale, pale face ! But I have never seen her like that, so plain. What brings her like that ?’

“ ‘ You seem ill, madame ; may I get you a little wine ?’

“ ‘ Yes, yes,’ she said, eagerly. ‘ Wine, wine, I must have wine !’

“ I set a glass and a freshly-opened bottle before her. She seized it, and drank glass after glass, till I feared her senses would go, but she evidently was too well accustomed to it ; it only seemed to steady her nerves.

“ ‘ Did you say you saw nothing there ?’

she said, with a dreadful glare in her once-magnificent eyes.

“ ‘ Nothing at all.’

“ ‘ Not a pale white face, with something gleaming in her hand? Oh, horrible! what can it mean?’

“ She wildly threw her arms towards the door, and hissed out something which sounded like, ‘ I promise, I swear by the Almighty, that I will not. He shall not die—I say it, I swear it, Margaret. Pardon! Forgive! I will never touch that accursed —’

“ ‘ What was it that you saw?’ I said, with a pretended look of terror. ‘ Was it a fair young girl, fair as an angel?’

“ The ruling passion, strong in death or drink, here asserted itself.

“ ‘ She was not so very fair. People made

a fuss about her because she was one of these English miladis, but there are others more beautiful.'

"I am a stolid person, and I am thankful that I was able to keep from laughing at this sudden descent from the sublime to the ridiculous, from awful murder to petty jealousy. I kept my face, however, and continued —

"Ah, I have seen a pale-faced girl in *my* dreams. Pale as the dead she was, for she was amongst the dead. Can it be her you have seen? She wishes to send a message to someone amongst the living. Can it be you, madame?'

"Ah, what is she? Who is she? Speak; who was the woman she wished to send a message to?'

“ She had risen from her seat. Her hands grasped my arm.

“ ‘ I was to tell it only to one woman ; I do not know who that woman is. Is it you ? ’

“ ‘ Yes ! yes ! Oh speak, was the dead girl very beautiful ? ’

“ ‘ Yes.’

“ ‘ Some people said she was as lovely as an angel.’

“ ‘ She was.’

“ ‘ Oh, could it be thou Margaret ? Thou wert never cruel.’

“ ‘ She wore on her finger a ring, a brilliant ring, shining all bright as her own beautiful self. She held it before my eyes ; it flashed upon me like the stars in heaven, and she said in my dream, “ She will know me by this.” ’

“‘Oh, God,’ said the miserable woman, ‘my sins have found me out.’

“At another time I should have laughed at my foolish melodramatic acting, but fear for Gretchen made it deadly earnest. I pitied the poor, friendless, shivering creature, but I must go on with what I had begun.

“‘What message did this spirit maiden send?’

“‘The message is but for one woman; she said I should know her if I saw her. But who are you?’

“‘I don’t care to hear this message. What have I to do with your dreams, sir?’

“Having now drunk many glasses out of the bottle, she suddenly rose with a loftier mien than perhaps sobriety often feels itself qualified to assume.

“ ‘You will send those things that I have bought to my hotel and wait for payment. I should like them early to-morrow; that is my address, “Mrs. Semple, Hôtel de France.” ’

“ ‘Ah! pardon me, madam, if I have behaved in rather an absurd manner; I am but a young man, and have lately gone into this business; anxiety has preyed upon my nerves. Will you accept another glass of wine?’

“ ‘Thank you.’

“ ‘It is true that my dreams have of late been troubled by a vision, such as you describe, and a sort of dream conversation has gone on between us. This name of Semple, being foreign, struck me as strange, but I heard it in my dreams. It is of course

very absurd; our nerves play us strange tricks. Certainly Semple was not the name I was to give her message to. May I ask you to look at this pretty little carved bracket?’

“She stopped and examined it, and still seemed inclined to ask more about the vision. Suddenly I let the name that Gretchen had known her by slip out of my lips. The bait was swallowed; she tottered to her seat again.

“‘What of her? Oh, tell me, never mind who I am; tell me of that woman. What was the message? I must have more wine.’

“She filled her glass again, but it seemed to be only so much water to her now. Nothing could deaden the gnawing terror.

“ ‘ This is the message, “ I whom you know, am sent from God to tell you this : Repent and sin no more, and all will be wiped out. But if you use those devilish arts again there is neither forgiveness in time nor in eternity. Remember poor Margaret.” ’

“ Fortunately ‘ trifles light as air seem to the guilty confirmation strong,’ and my poor attempt at scenical performance went off to perfection. She clasped her hands and whispered —

“ ‘ I do repent, I do repent ; he shall not die, Margaret. Stay, did she say I am forgiven ? ’

“ ‘ Yes, forgiven quite, and it shall be forgotten, but remember the conditions.’

“ ‘ Thank God for that ; for that I bless her ! Stay, she may again appear to you in your

dreams, then tell her—Oh, what was it I thought of? There is very little in this bottle I think? There was only a little when you brought it. Could you oblige me with a mouthful more?’

“ ‘No madame, you have already had a good deal, and drink may cause you to forget her message.’

“ ‘Tell her that I would have burnt that accursed book, so that its hideous secrets might be lost for ever, but I sold it for the drink. He gives me no money that he does not watch me spending. He is there outside, will she visit your dreams again?’

“ ‘I doubt it.’

“ ‘If she does, ask her to teach me to forget.’

“ ‘No,’ I said, ‘you must remember.’

“ ‘I’ll remember till the day of my death. Pray for me; I should not have done that, tell her, but the dreadful book put it there.’ said she, touching her forehead. ‘He is waiting for me,’ she continued, speaking more to the door where Gretchen had come and gone through than to me. ‘He is mine now, but he hates me. But no harm shall happen to him, no, no harm at all, Margaret, I promise.’

“She seemed barely conscious, and I hardly knew how to get her out of the shop. Angry as I felt with Gretchen, I longed to go and reassure her, but this wretched woman sat on, talking to herself. At length I saw her rise, and without more words she walked a little unsteadily to the door. I

offered her my arm to steady her, and to get her a cab, but she refused, and presently I saw her join a remarkably handsome man, who looked at her with utter disgust.

“ ‘You drunken beast,’ was the greeting he received her with, ‘I’ve had enough of you.’

“ ‘No, Archie, no, I’ve only had a little drop. Come home dear; I shall be so good, so good and loving now.’

“ ‘Eugh,’ was the answer, and he pulled her arm through his and hurried her off to their hotel as fast as her tottering steps could go.

“ I was in a humour to sympathize with all miserable people, whether their misery was from their own fault or not. Poor man, and still poorer woman. I returned and shut

my doors tightly for that night. Vague terrors filled my mind as to what next might happen. Might Lord Forsyth not be the next to come in, or that Sir Laidlaw? After shutting the shop, I mounted with a heavy heart to our little sitting-room, with little appetite for the humble feast my Gretchen had prepared. She was sitting in an agony of terror.

“ ‘ Oh, Fritz, I looked out of the window and saw Archie Semple. I was almost afraid he saw me, and I ran down to ask you what I should do, and there was that dreadful woman.’

“ ‘ Do not fear, Gretchen, she knows nothing; and I have frightened her so thoroughly that she will not come here again. I must devise some way of warning that man with-

out betraying you ; I cannot just now see what is best, what is right.'

"Gretchen was uncomfortably shy and nervous all that evening, and I was not much better.

"The dreadful thought was now borne in upon me that I must find some more suitable home for her—that I, a young man, was not a fitting guardian for her. I sat brooding over these thoughts, and picturing what my life would be without her.

" 'Gretchen,' I said, 'come and sit beside me. I want to speak to you of something that lies very heavily on my heart.'

"She came from the window, where she was watching the fading light of day, that was beginning gently to mingle with the rising light of the moon. She brought a footstool

to my side, and seating herself on it, she clasped her hands over my knee.

“Gretchen, this evening has revealed several things to me. First, I see that I have done you a great wrong in keeping you under my roof. I am not a right person to be a guardian or protector to a young lady. If you were in bodily danger, to give my life for you would be my pleasure. But the danger you are in is a danger that I am utterly powerless to protect you from. I cannot defend you from the malignant tongues that there are in the world. Our lives have, God knows, been innocent, but that will be no protection. Therefore, we must think of some place more befitting your rank, or, at any rate, your sex. That doctor said he knew of such a place. Of my life

without you we need not speak. What I have already gained from your companionship is unspeakable. But we will not dwell on my feelings just now.'

" ' But we are brother and sister. Brothers and sisters live together—why not we ? ' "

" I fear I gave vent to an expression of impatience that she had never before heard from me.

" ' Gretchen, this nonsense we must stop. We are not born brother and sister, and brothers and sisters cannot be made. Too late I saw by your manner how little one may act upon this fancied relationship. When I took a brother's privilege, and gave you a brother's kiss, though I had never done it before, I saw how it was resented. I most humbly beg

your pardon. It was a great liberty, and I saw by your face it was not to be repeated. It shall not be repeated.'

“ ‘ Why, what did I do ? ’ ”

“ ‘ What did you do ? It is difficult to say. I only know that you turned in an instant from Gretchen Hübner to my Lady Margaret Laidlaw. You were right. I beg your pardon, and I have learnt my lesson. But let us not play at brother and sister again. That farce is played out. But this accursed woman coming here to-night has warned me of the danger that surrounds you, and we must part. Oh, Gretchen, if you had been other than you are, —if you had been a poor working man's daughter, I might perhaps have hoped, as you cannot be my sister, that I might have won you for another place as near and as dear to

me. But the doctor said what was true when he warned me against loving you. Between us there is a great gulf fixed, more impassible than that between Dives and Lazarus, I think. So let it be. And now let us turn to a more practical subject, and think of some place more fitting for you, so that if you are discovered you can give an account of yourself that will satisfy this world of ours.'

"I turned my face towards the darkness, so that I might not see her, for my heart was breaking with the thought of parting from her. But for both our sakes it was better. She made no answer for a long time, but sat with her hand resting on my knee. Once or twice there was a movement as if she were going to speak; then all was still again. I

would not hurry her, but give her plenty of time to consider everything. At length I heard a little quick sound, as if her heart were quickening speed. I felt her hands begin to tremble, and then she presently rose and placed her stool so that she could come close to my ear. With nervous fingers she buttoned and unbuttoned the collar of my coat, so that if I had thought of anything beyond the work in hand, I might have felt it very uncomfortable.

“‘Fritz,’ she said, ‘may I tell you something?’

“‘Yes,’ I said, listlessly.

“‘Will you mind my whispering something into your ear ever so softly?’

“‘I am not deaf, and there is no one else to hear you. However, you may whisper if you

like. I fancy all you have to say to me might be said from the church steeple.'

" ' There is that prim old canary listening to every word. He ought to be asleep, and then you must not look at me when I speak. Look over in that corner. Don't you know the Scotch song —

Oh, dinna look sae sair at me,
For oh, ye ken me true ;
Oh, gin ye look sae sair at me,
I darna look at you.

" Her dear hand here let my button alone for a minute, and, taking hold of my nose, she turned my head round by this handle towards the darkest corner of the room.

" ' Look in that direction now, and don't look at me. I can see your eyes by the moonlight that is stealing in, just as well as if the sun was taking a spy at us. Now, then, let

me speak. It seems that I had a very disagreeable expression on my face when you kissed me—I cannot help my face; it is as God made it—that I turned up my nose at you, but my nose turns up a little by nature. Once you told me you liked the look of that pert organ—that I at once reminded you, by some mysterious spiritual communication, that I was an Earl's daughter, and so on, and so on. Now, I will put a case to you. Perhaps you are too stupid to understand it. But I'll try and make you.'

"Here a long pause came, and my curiosity was slightly roused.

"‘Supposing, now,’ she went on, after taking a long breath, ‘supposing you loved, and long had loved some good, noble, grand woman; pure-minded, generous, self-forget-

ful, loving, supposing you had long loved her in a secret, silent way; tried to persuade yourself all in vain that you just loved her as a friend, a benefactress. And all this time my poor hero only suspected that she looked in that kind way upon him that a superior sometimes will look upon an inferior.'

"I looked up, a little surprised out of my wretchedness. What could she mean? She did not generally speak of herself in this high and mighty tone. 'A benefactress!' She certainly had been that to me, but it was strange to hear her call herself so. Who was this grand, noble, pure-minded, generous woman? Most assuredly it described herself, but she had never before described herself in these glowing terms. She must have some other woman in view, but

what on earth had I to do with this other woman?

“ ‘Gretchen, I know such a case too well! only too well!’

“ ‘No, you don’t, Fritz Hübner. You know nothing about it. I know the sort of thing you understand, you stupid fellow, and I wish I had known it, as I do now, long ago. I’ll tell you the only sort of difficulty your mind can arrive at—a great lumping creature like yourself, grunting and groaning about a poor namby-pamby, stupid girl with nothing noble about her but her dolly face, and what he calls her statuesque figure. No, my hero is different. He loves his love because she is really noble. Your creature loves a mass of lilies and roses, and fancies that these lilies and roses represent some

wonderful virtues. My hero loves the beauties of the mind, the soul, the heart, which will blossom and bloom when your poor lilies and roses are crumbling into decay, even though Madame Rachel should try to preserve them. Now have a little patience; I want to tell you what befell this poor hero. He owed everything to this idol of his—food, raiment, happiness, health, even his very life. She was very, very kind, but nothing more. Was it not disheartening to this idol worshipper? Speak, sir, was it not so?’

“ ‘It was so, but what is to be done with this friend of yours? Why did he not try and ask her to be his wife? It might have put it into her head at least.’

“ ‘Yes, it might, and it might also have

broken up all the pleasant intercourse that there had been between them. These kill-or-cure remedies are not for all. My hero wanted some strength of mind, and would rather live as her servant than live that living death away from her. So when all was quiet and he was alone and in his room at night he took the one form of consolation open to him. He was not very manly, I fear, for he sometimes cried himself to sleep. Fritz, you are yawning ! ’

“ ‘ No I was not. But has your story a moral ? I am afraid your hero is a bit of a fool. ’

“ ‘ He is nothing of the sort. He is much nicer than your goose with his lilies and roses, and his statue-like women. But now I come to the cream of the whole story. But

I don't know how to put it. Say something to encourage me, dear Fritz. I am new at telling a story.'

"I looked at her. Her lips were trembling, her eyes were full of tears. Was it possible that this hero of hers was some real person in whose fate she took an undue interest. I had thought at one time she had been describing myself, but that was not so. She rose and went to the window and back again. Then like a spirit in the moonlight she came back and leant over me.

" 'There was a time when my young hero thought he had crushed that dear love for his darling mistress, and he thought he might out-grow it, and just be patient, and useful to her.'

" 'What ails you, sweet Gretchen? Speak

of it no more just now. You are over-excited, worn, tired. This sight of old faces has upset you.'

" 'No, I will tell you now.'

" She was sobbing bitterly, and I drew her to me.

" 'One day,' she said, 'this woman, this lady that I told you of —'

" 'Yes, yes, I know, his mistress, his kind benefactress, whom he loved so dearly, what of her?'

" 'She, when he was least expecting it, gave her, I mean him, a kiss.'

" It was now my turn to feel the excitement that seemed to be moving her, making her voice tremble, her whole body restless.

" 'Did she? Impudent scoundrel!'

" 'Keep still; I have more to tell. Keep

down your hands. The blood rushed to the lad's face. Did she really love him as he did her? or was she only treating him as a child, a boy, to be petted and caressed? or what did she mean, she who had always been as—well, what shall I say, as rigid as a head teacher at a boarding-school for young ladies. There, forgive this tedious story. Oh Fritz, I fear I have immodestly shown you the secrets of a heart; but I should not have done so, only something you said has brought it out.'

"I sprang up from my seat.

"'Oh, Gretchen, what does this story mean? My head seems whirling round that moon. Do you mean—Nay, tell me in plain words what you mean?'

"'I'll tell you,' she said; 'this moonlight

makes me bold. You were rude enough to say that if I had been *not* Margaret Laidlaw, but someone else, you would have made me your wife. But poor Margaret Laidlaw cannot help being Margaret Laidlaw. Still would she be —'

" ' My wife ? '

" ' Yes, ten thousand times ten thousand be your wife. That will be about a million of wives, won't it ? Yes, sir, you gave me a kiss this afternoon. But after your rude speech I'll have none of it. Here take it back. '

" ' Something like a rose leaf fell on my cheek. It was Gretchen's first kiss to Fritz Hübner, the carpenter. '

" ' It is a long time ago since that evening. My impression now is that we did not talk

much afterwards, but sat late into the night looking out upon the splendour of the moon, content simply with the mere feeling of loving and living. To feel her near me, to hear her breath, what could life offer besides? At length she arose, and bending over me, she whispered —

“ ‘Good night, darling; try to forget that I made you an offer of marriage. It was most unmaidenly.’

“ ‘Never!’ I said, as I held her in my arms. ‘If I forget everything else in the world I shall remember that.’

“And so ended that evening, the first of a long life of unspeakable happiness.

“The next day I went to Mrs. Semple’s hotel to take the things she had ordered. I was met by a waiter, who told me she had been

taken suddenly ill in the night—that two doctors had been with her, and it was said that her illness was brain fever, but the chamber-maid had overheard someone say it was delirium tremens. He advised me not to leave the carved wood, as there was a doubt if I should ever be paid. The husband, or whatever he was, had had a terrible quarrel with her, and had left, never, he said, to return. He had told the landlady and the doctors that she was to have all proper attendance, and for that he was willing to pay, but that this woman who called herself Mrs. Semple had no legal claim upon him, and he would pay for no unnecessary expenditure. He had sent for the best medical advice, and had left her in the doctors' charge. She was to have everything for her comfort,

liberally supplied, but nothing more. He had then left, the man knew not whither he had gone. Some weeks afterwards, as I passed the hotel, I saw my friend the waiter again, and I had the curiosity to ask how Mrs. Semple was. She was dead. The man heartily congratulated me upon not having left my goods with her. He evidently viewed life entirely from a business point of view. I thanked him much for his good advice. Money was beginning to be a very great object with me, and I had sold the frames already to a better customer and had the money in my pocket. I, however, could not help feeling shocked, and felt myself a little guilty. Could the fright I had given her have had any effect upon her last illness? However, I was relieved from a great feeling

of responsibility. Such a woman certainly ought not to go about among unsuspecting people. She was as dangerous as a raving madman.

CHAPTER V.

“GRETCHEN and I were married as soon as we could manage it. To the outside world it made but little change, but to ourselves what words can express it. To feel that an army of earls or Sir Laidlaws could never separate her from me! No familiarity, no lapse of years, have ever cleared away the halo of romance, of fairy-land, that has always surrounded her. About a year after our happy

marriage our eldest child was born. Some gentle, daughterly recollections moved her to call him after her father. I made no objections, though I earnestly hoped our baby might only inherit his name, not his vices. I had put up a little balcony outside our windows, strong and serviceable, where, when my Gretchen was well enough, I carried her, so that she could enjoy the fine air and the magnificent town view from our window. It was only a town view, still it was very fine. There were distant hills, too, with splendid sunsets; and here, I am afraid, beside her couch, I often idled away some time when I ought to have been at work. But the sight of her with our baby was not a sight to be easily forgotten.

“ ‘How you do glare at your son. As if

no one ever had a son before,' she would say.

“‘I was not looking at him. I was looking at his mother.’

“‘Well, don’t look at his mother any longer. You must go to your work in half-an-hour, and you have only this odd time for your painting. Get to work now. You are worse than a child with a doll.’

“One day I was sitting with her at the window. There had been a holiday in the town for some purpose, and I was free. She lay enjoying the lively scene outside. I had my painting materials all about me, and had the pleasing sensation that I was working now to some purpose. She had risen, and was standing looking over my shoulder criticising my work, and resting our baby on my

shoulder. Suddenly I heard her give a little scream.

“ ‘ Take me in ! Take me in ! Fritz, look there. Oh, don’t let them see me ! ’

“ I started up, and beheld a queer-looking man, with a sharp-featured, keen-eyed woman, staring about in every direction. I lifted Gretchen into the house, and laid her down.

“ ‘ Who are they ? ’ I said.

“ ‘ Oh, Fritz, it is Janet Davidson and that old gossip, Tam Donaldson.’

“ ‘ But they can do you no harm now, even if they wished. Would you not like to see your old maid ? ’

“ ‘ Oh, not now ! not now ! Don’t let them see me. Let us forget the past. I have no one now but you and our baby. It is all I want.’

“For some time I saw them prowling about the town, and feared greatly that they would come into my shop, for it was beginning to be a sort of show place. These repeated alarms first suggested to us the idea of completely separating ourselves from the old world, and seeking our fortunes in the new. Various things worked together towards this plan, and one day we two, and our darling boy, set out on our journey to the country which has since been our home. Heaven has prospered us, and has enabled me to place Gretchen in a position which is more her natural one. Here she has made many friends, and is valued as she deserves to be. Two other children have been born to us.

“There was one terrible time through which I went. My Gretchen was seized with small-

pox. The kindness we received indeed was something to look back upon, but the anguish of those few weeks was indeed bitter. At length, however, I had the unspeakable pleasure of receiving her back to life, and even better health than before, her loveliness not marred by that terrible disease. Some say her looks are not what they were. I cannot see it. She is even more lovely than before to me.

“One feeling has taken complete possession of her, viz., that our boys shall not know till they have passed the thorny places of youth that they are so nearly related to one of the noble houses of England.

“‘No, dear; it will do them no good. You do not know what is the fate of these outside hangers-on of a noble house. If they went

and saw the rock whence I was hewn—youth is easily taken with glamour and tinsel—we should never have them back with us the simple-minded sons of their father. Besides, one cannot trust to the discretion of lads; and I have no mind to have our history dug up for everybody's gossip. Let it rest. When they are old enough, and have learnt to value themselves for what we are, and they are, not for the greatness and riches of their forefathers, then you shall tell them the story of Gretchen and her true lover.' ”

CHAPTER VI.

I CLOSED the paper. My father had fancied that I knew what I had not even dreamed of. Yes, he fancied that I had suspected who my dear mother was. Be it so ! My mother and he should never know what dreadful suspicion had really crossed our minds. Base wretches, thus to suspect her. But where was James ? He must know all.

“Well ?” said my father, as he returned with the doctor.

“He is better, I think.”

“Our mama comes this evening, and James, too, and Gertrude.”

The doctor, however, recommended rest and quiet, and I was ordered to bed for a few days. There I had an opportunity of giving James the papers.

“Idiots that we were!” he said. “Why, now I can certainly trace the likeness to my mother. How was it that we never found it out?”

“The same thing strikes me. It is well, is it not? James, I think you and I would have run into the awkward dilemma of falling in love with the same woman, or rather picture.”

“Whom we fancied my mother had poisoned!”

We both seemed to waken from a dream, and burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, which was interrupted by my mother and father coming in with anxious faces to look at the invalid.

“Ah! well, if he laughs like that he cannot be so very bad. So, boys, I hear your father has let the cat out of the bag, and told you about our youth, and our loves, and our quarrels and fightings, and all the black eyes he gave me, and all the scratches I gave him; so take a warning by the sad story of poor Margaret and Fritz Hübner.”

Strange it was to see our heroine in real life standing there and feeling my head if it was hot, and my hand if it was feverish. Truly it was strange that I had never traced a likeness. Or was it that the ravages of that

dreadful disease were beginning to wear out? Yes, I see plainly the whole scene that had gone on in the little quiet carpenter's house long ago—the girl that had so twined herself round the gentle-natured man with the rough shell.

One little word in conclusion. My mother, in spite of her objection to opening up any communication with her past life, ever cherished a deep interest in her young brothers. She pictured them as two lads like ourselves. After the death of her father and her step-mother, which took place a little later on, all connection with the old world seemed to have been quite washed out. Suddenly she was surprised by reading in the newspapers that two young Englishmen of high rank were travelling in the United

States of America—the Earl of Forsyth and his brother, the Honble. James Laidlaw Semple, of Mavishaugh. My mother, for the first time, might be suspected of being a thorough tuft-hunter, and finally she succeeded in her arts. In fact, the young men brought letters of introduction to our house.

They were fine fellows. Catherine Semple had done her duty by them. That they at once took a great fancy to my mother was what we were accustomed to, but that there was some cord, unknown to themselves, drawing them to her side was plain to our better instructed minds. Tam Donaldson used often to talk of what he called “naturalness.” I think he would have

described the feelings of these young men to their unknown sister as natural.

My father's anxious soul soon flew to the conclusion that the young men's constant visits to our house meant danger to Gertrude, their unsuspected niece. But he was disposed to be romantic, and we often laughed at him on this account, no one more than mama. Gertrude had not as yet ceased to set all her surplus affections upon a very large doll, by name Amanda Fitz Alan.

One day as we sat in the garden of my father's new country house (which was now as perfect as he could make it), and enjoyed the summer's evening breezes, Lord Forsyth, whose eyes had been fixed on my mother for some time, said—

"Gretchen means short for Margaret, does it not, Herr Hübner?"

"Yes."

"Your wife, the Frau Hübner, is well-named Margaret. She reminds me of another Margaret, a Margaret that we have always loved, though we never saw her, for she has been long in her grave."

My mother had not heard this conversation, for she had gone to pick a few flowers from a distant flower-plot. As she came up Lord Forsyth put out his hand to her.

"I think I shall no longer call you the Frau Hübner, but my sister, Lady Margaret Laidlaw, the Rose of Craigannoch, as the poor people name her now!"

My mother started, and turned deadly pale.

“Who has told you that? Where have you heard it?”

There was a pause—a moment’s excitement. The young men looked all round as if demanding an explanation. Some lame explanation was given; but the ice was broken, their suspicions were aroused. My mother had nothing now to fear, and in the course of a few days they knew all. Whether my mother will ever pay a visit to her old home again and see her beautiful grave is a question.

I think I understand the feeling that has influenced her so strongly in never allowing her past history to be known till it has

forced itself out by accident—the fear that my father, brought into contact with a society into which he was not born, might suffer from that polite contempt, that high-born ill-breeding, with which some people, born into the purple, eye those who have come by an accident among them.

She was not afraid now. Being foreign to all her great people of the world, he was free from the scattered h's and such misfortunes as amuse the upper ten thousand of England. Conventional vulgarity only hurts our own country people, and real vulgarity he never possessed.

The beautiful ring that Archie Semple gave Margaret Laidlaw is now shining brightly on the hand of the future Mrs.

James Laidlaw Semple, and so is likely to go back to "the rich brewers folk after a'," as Tam Donaldson would have said.

Craigannoch is no longer an ogre's castle to us, shut in behind high walls, with dragons, or rather sign-posts, warning us at every opening or stile that he who entered there must leave all hope behind, and be prosecuted to the utmost limits of the law. It has become a sort of second home to us, and I sincerely hope that my mother's fears that we should become idle hangers-on of a big house, despisers of the humble rank of our dear father, boasting of the light reflected by other people, have been proved to be groundless.

We have, I hope, learnt our lesson from

her, and love the place because it was her home; and we love our relations, not because they are great, but because they are thoroughly good, and in many ways have shown that they are worthy to be called her brothers.

THE END.





